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SUBJECT: BIYA LAYS OUT VISION FOR CAMEROON'S DEVELOPMENT

REF: YAOUNDE 1109

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. In a rare publicized meeting with his cabinet, President Paul Biya on September 12 ordered his new government to focus on achieving more robust economic growth, progress on social issues like health and education, and better governance, including increased efforts against anti-corruption. Biya's announced agenda dovetails well with USG goals, including those of the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Many commentators welcomed the spirit of Biya's remarks, but there were questions as to whether the high-minded rhetoric would be matched by political will and results. Given the general thrust of Biya's September 7 cabinet shuffle (reftel), we are disposed to give him the benefit of the doubt and seek ways to help bring his vision to fruition. End summary.

Three Goals: Cribbed from the MCC?

¶2. (SBU) Presidential convocations of the entire cabinet are always headline events in Cameroon; Biya seldom addresses his ministers directly, especially en masse. His September 7 directives to the government (as released to the press after the event--a first for Biya) laid out an ambitious agenda and lofty goals. Biya enumerated three overarching priorities:

--greater economic growth (especially to create more jobs)
--more progress on social issues, especially health and education
--more effective governance (including performance reviews) and stepped-up anti-corruption efforts.

Economic Freedom

¶3. (U) In his pitch for a "revival of growth" Biya called for greater economic freedom and renewed investment in domestic industrial and agricultural production. Lamenting that the Government of Cameroon's "reflexes remain those (of) an administered economy," Biya said "the government must change its attitude towards the private sector, notably as concerns the tax system, by granting more incentives."

Investing in People

¶4. (U) Biya called upon his ministers to "stimulate social progress," especially in the areas of health and education.

Biya singled out the need for greater access to water, electricity, and housing.

Ruling Justly

¶5. (U) Biya noted that his ambitious plan was made possible by the "clear majorities" his party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), won in the July 22 National Assembly and municipal elections and reaffirmed his conviction that the elections had been free and fair except for "a few dysfunctions, which were corrected by the Supreme Court." Biya focused on the need to step up anti-corruption efforts ("the embezzlement of public funds, regardless of its form, is a crime against the people who are thus deprived of their resources") and improve government performance. He insisted, without going into further details, that "government should expect to be assessed on the basis of performance criteria."

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Comment: Saying (Mostly) All the Right Things
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¶6. (SBU) Biya focused his government on all of the right priorities, with one glaring exception: the imperative to strengthen Cameroon's democratic and judicial institutions--the two areas where Cameroon scores worst on MCC criteria--was conspicuously absent from Biya's agenda. There was no reference to the supposedly imminent creation of an independent electoral body (ELECAM), and Biya deigned to speak about democracy only to insist that the 2007 elections were a success (a view widely out of touch with the

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Cameroonian street) and to demonize opposition candidates in those elections as "demagogic and unrealistic."

¶7. (SBU) Nonetheless, most Cameroonians would concede that economic growth and job creation must be Cameroon's paramount goals for the near term. We believe Biya is sincere in his stated desire to grow the economy, invest in the social sectors, and improve the performance of government. Now that the team is in place and the agenda has been set, it remains to be seen how well action will match rhetoric. End comment.
GARVEY